

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you down like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, *How can a body withstand this?*
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

Ellen Bass¹

Reflections

This poem needs no commentary, really; often, my fear is that whatever I might offer as reflection could dilute rather than enhance the experience of personal reading. This one in particular has hit me quite like a fist, a punch of recognition: *yes*, I know that kind of “obesity of grief” and I know, too, that feeling of homecoming, even if tinged with some resignation—*yes*, okay world, “I will love you, again.”

There have been seasons of my life, as in any life, I suspect, where I feel I am barely above water, my sadnesses—whatever they are or have been—like a weight, like silt in the throat. And in those seasons I have experienced an intensity of feeling that all but devastates me,

¹ “The Thing Is” by Ellen Bass from *Mules of Love*, BOA Editions, 2002.

cripples me, undoes me, and I am unable to explain it much beyond that. It is a thing bigger than I, fierce and silent. A thing.

And then, somehow, a light in the darkness eventually. What was it, that mercy I glimpsed? What was that fleeting sensation I had of *more*? That there might be more than this after all, more for me, for all of us? In one of my dark hours I wrote on a piece of paper beside my bed, *please*. And I suppose some answer came to me—one of littleness and substance, like a seedcorn—which was not really an answer at all, but a response I knew was real and near: even when we are alone, we are never alone. Though I have since had moments of doubt about this, I remember the clarity with which I learned and knew it once. And I hold fast to it.

The thing is, as the poet says, it is a plain face into which we are sometimes looking. Without charm, without romance, perhaps even without cheer. I like to look into that plain face as though I am reading a vow, with the kind of seriousness and awe a vow might be said to inspire—a vow that I will look there, into the face, with whatever strength and patience I have, trusting the seedcorn of the heart by faith, for there is more.

The thing is, there is more. I know it to be true, again.

✧ About the poet

Ellen Bass (b. 1947) was born in Philadelphia and raised in New Jersey. A graduate of Goucher College and Boston University, she is the author of several books of poems, including a forthcoming collection. Her work appears frequently in *The New Yorker* and *American Poetry Review*, and she has won some of the country's most prestigious awards. She has founded poetry workshops at Salinas Valley State Prison and the Santa Cruz, California jails, and she teaches at Pacific University. Recently elected as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, she has noted, "Poetry is the most intimate of all writing. I want to speak from me to myself and then from me to you."



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